



Coalition Calls for City to Release People from Philadelphia Jails and to Declare a Moratorium on Incarceration Ahead of the COVID-19 Virus

March 12, 2020

PHILADELPHIA – We, the undersigned organizations, call on Philadelphia to immediately release all people who are currently held in Philadelphia’s jails. We also urge the District Attorney’s Office, the First Judicial District, and the Philadelphia Adult Probation and Parole Department to stop adding new people to the jail population immediately.

With each passing day, COVID-19 (coronavirus) continues to spread across cities and towns in the United States. All indicators suggest that the highly contagious respiratory illness, which has been deadly to many, is only likely to continue spreading. Just yesterday, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Philadelphia. **It is not a question of if, but when, it will enter the Philadelphia jail system.** However, as city leaders take steps to effectively address the spread of this epidemic, noticeably absent from these preparations and discussions is any serious concern for the over 4,000 people incarcerated in our local jails who are the most vulnerable among our community members.

People in jails are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19 out of anyone in our communities. The conditions in jails and prisons are notoriously unsanitary, and access to adequate medical treatment is routinely denied. We know that jails and prisons are [a public health crisis](#), and [a primary driver of health inequity](#), even during non-pandemic times. These conditions, combined with closed living quarters and the fact that many incarcerated people are aging and have underlying health conditions, make people in jails and prisons particularly susceptible to COVID-19. As one public official has warned, [“all prisons and jails should anticipate that the coronavirus will enter their facility, and they need to have plans for monitoring and treating anyone who has symptoms.”](#)

The Philadelphia Prison Department’s current plan to quarantine newly incarcerated people is wholly inadequate for addressing a possible outbreak of COVID-19. There is nothing in the Philadelphia Prison Department’s plan that guarantees that incarcerated people, prison staff, attorneys, court staff, judges, or anyone they come into contact with, will be kept safe from the virus. The only way to prevent the spread of the disease is through social distancing and self-isolation; something that would amount to further extreme human rights abuses to attempt in a jail, and that would be futile. Indeed, it is impossible to prevent the spread of a virus in a jail when incarcerated people do not have freedom of movement, and where prison staff and guards are exposed to the community outside the walls. Holding people in jails and prisons during a pandemic only punishes incarcerated people even further, and puts them at a heightened health risk. **As a result, Marc Stein, former Assistant Secretary for Health Services for the**

Washington State Department of Corrections, [has proposed the prisons and jails consider releasing people to manage the COVID-19 outbreak.](#)

The city of Philadelphia has a *public health mandate* to release everyone held in Philadelphia's jails, and to stop adding to the jail population. Doing so will protect the lives of thousands of Philadelphians who are imprisoned in horrible conditions in Philadelphia, while helping to safeguard the health of all Philadelphians.

Sincerely,

Broad Street Ministries
DecarceratePA
Frontline Dads
Just Leadership USA (Close the Creek)
Movement Alliance Project (formerly MMP)
People's Paper Co-Op
Philadelphia Bail Fund
Philadelphia Community Bail Fund
Reentry Think Tank
Resource Generation